DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 204 200 SO 013 396

AUTHOR Engle, Shirley H.
TITLE Defining the Social Studies: What is the Problem?
PUB DATE Nov 80
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (60th, New Orleans, LA, November 26-29, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship Education: Critical Thinking: *Definitions: *Educational Objectives: Elementary Secondary Education: Socialization: Social Sciences: *Social Studies: Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

This paper offers three main reasons to explain why social studies lends itself so reluctantly to definition. The first reason is that there is a high degree of ambiguity regarding social studies goals within the social studies profession and among people generally. This ambiguity is characterized by the conflict between the belief that education should teach students to develop critical-thinking skills and the belief that schools should socialize individuals to the circumstances, needs, and opportunities of industrial civilization. The second reason is that there is a lack of clarity in the relationship between social studies and the social sciences. Many social studies educators treat social studies as though they were merely watered-down versions of the social sciences rather than as a more comprehensive intellectual endeavor in which knowledge from many sources can be used to resolve social problems. The third reason is that most social studies educators fail to make necessary distinctions between the role of scholarship and the role of teaching. This lack of distinction results in confusion for several reasons, including that research is necessarily carried on in the hypothetical mood, whereas teaching is usually conducted in the expository mood. The conclusion is that social studies educators will contribute more to a clear and meaningful definition of social studies if they concentrate on identifying major objectives and on describing precisely the kinds of teaching methods which are consistent with those goals. (DB)

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DEFINING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

November 1980

Shirley H. Engle
Professor Emeritus
Indiana University

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It is fashionable these days for social studies professionals to complain about the confusion over definition of the field. In a recent study of the social studies field, Barr, Barth, and Shermis[1] concluded "the field of social studies is . . . caught up in ambiguity, inconsistency, and contradiction . . . The confusion in the field is apparent . . . The content of the social studies is a smorgasbord . . . we seem to be in deep trouble." Nor is this a new problem. Lawrence Metcalf[2] complained years ago that "detailed listing of social studies aims differ little, if any, from the statement of aims of general education." We seem to have a persistent problem of saying just what the social studies is about and how it is distinguished from other parts of schooling.

Why does the social studies lend itself so reluctantly to definition? The problem is threefold. In the first place, there is ambiguity within the profession and among people generally over goals. In the second, there is a lack of clarity as to the relationship between the social studies and the social sciences, and in the third, there is a failure to make necessary distinctions between the role of scholarship and that of teaching.

Ambiguity Within the Profession and Among People Generally Over Goals. We are in difficulty at the very beginning of any attempt at definition, both with respect to the content of the social studies and the teaching method used because we persist within the field itself to

pursue, at one and the same time, contradictory goals for social education. Although we may not be fully aware of the intellectual problem posed, we are trapped between the Jeffersonian idea that the role of education is to teach future citizens, "how to judge for themselves what will secure or endanger our freedom," in short, that education of the people should be liberating or liberal, and the idea, held by a host of others, both educators and people in general, that the schools are for socializing the individual to the circumstances, needs, and opportunities of industrial civilization. Within this range of views on the role of education, social studies education can be seen as either liberating or as the socialization of youth to an acceptance of proper and right attitudes as defined by their elders.

The attitude of many, possibly most, professionals toward the social studies was expressed in 1930 by C. C. Peters[3] in a book entitled Objectives and Procedures to Civic Education. Peters saw the social studies as implanting democracy through drill and conditioning with proper understandings, attitudes, and habits much as Skinner would approach it today. Students were to be disciplined rather than reasoned with. It was fairly easy for the employer class to embrace this idea. Ironically, this idea of education also squared with those of most immigrant, working parents who sent their children to school not so much for intellectual stimulation as to prepare them to fit into the American work scene. As Henry Steele Commanger[4] has well documented, the intent of free public education from its inception was to discipline rather than to truly educate the workers, particularly the children of immigrant parents, while the elite was to receive its education in

mostly private liberal arts colleges and preparatory schools.

Many leaders in American Society have held similar views not only in Peters' day and before but to the present time. In the words of Woodrow Wilson, "We want one class of persons to have a liberal education and we want another class of persons, a very much larger class of necessity in any society, to forgo the privilege of liberal education and fit themselves to perform manual tasks." Similar views have been echoed by such famous educators as Horace Mann, credited as the founder of free public education, J. E. Russell, famous head of Columbia University's Teachers College, Charles W. Elliott, president of Harvard University and, in fairly recent times, by James C. Conant, self appointed scholar-critic of American education.

Surprisingly, such famous citizens as Jane Adams and Samuel Gompers, both closely connected to the American labor movement, held similar views. The National Education Association, as confused as others on this issue, has frequently supported vocational as opposed to liberal education of the masses. The persistence of this idea is represented by the current emphasis on career education, which some prominent members of the social studies professions seem to embrace, and the alacrity with which Congress supports vocational as opposed to the liberal in the schools today. That liberal education for the masses has flourished at all in this climate of prestigious opposition is almost a miracle.

Not fully understanding the issues involved, ambiguity and contradiction have characterized our response as a profession to the question of goals. Is the role of the social studies to free the mind of the individual or is it to socialize him? Is the citizen end product

ideally to be inner directed or outer directed? Is the emphasis to be on the development of the intellect and independence of mind or is it to be on the formation of good habits and "proper" attitudes? We have variously described the good citizen, which is everyone's goal, to be law-abiding, cooperating, accepting, socially well adjusted, loyal and patriotic, a kind of citizen-solider, on the one hand, and almost in the same breath, we have described the optimal citizen as a questioning, critical, independent thinking activist, even a cantankerous trouble maker, on the other. Can we have it both ways?

It is indeed possible that we can and that we must have it both ways if a democratic society is to survive and to prosper. To contemplate this possibility changes the way we must approach the problem of goals. Ambiguity may arise not because we are unclear as to which of two disparate goals to pursue, but because we do not clearly understand how to relate socializing and nonsocializing experiences in a meaningful way. To be able to do so would not only require the most careful planning and sequencing of experience, but continuous interplay between the socializing and nonsocializing experiences. The reduction of confusion over goals under these circumstances rests on the pursuit of such questions as: What are the ultimate as contrasted to the immediate or instrumental goals of the social studies? What is the potential for intellectual development of children at various grade levels? What safeguards need to be instituted to protect children from excessive indoctrination? How can socialization be utilized and phased into the broader purpose of preparing self-directed citizens?

It is possible that socializing experiences are appropriate at lower grade levels, but should be replaced at the upper grade levels

with primarily counter-socializing experiences. It is possible that transmission of the culture through the telling of stories is quite appropriate for first graders, but should be out of the question for tenth graders when the serious study of social problems is more appropriate. It is quite possible that the disciplines should be used differently at different grade levels. For instance, at lower grade levels, the disciplines may afford a fairly reliable source from which simple stories, descriptions and explanations may be drawn for purposes of transmitting an understanding of society by very young children. But at higher grade levels, the disciplines, studied in a more genuinely disciplined fashion, may be probed not only for their own credibility as knowledge, but for their bearing on social problems and issues.

Looked at in this fashion, the problem of goals is no longer an "either/or" matter, but rather one of working out the exact fit between socializing and counter-socializing experiences, between transmission and disciplined inquiry. Ambiguity and confusion is reduced as the nature of this relationship is carefully worked out.

Lack of Clarity as to the Relationship Between the Social Studies and the Social Sciences. The problem of defining the social studies is complicated by our failure to draw a clear distinction between the social studies and the social sciences. We prepare teachers of social studies by schooling them primarily in one or more social sciences. We sometimes define the social studies as if they were merely watered down versions of the social sciences. To do either of these ignores important distinctions that may be made between social science and social studies. In the first place, social scientists have never claimed

that their goal is the education of citizens let alone "good" citizenship. Their goal is the discovery, codification and to some extent the interpretation of knowledge about society, particularly the discovery of new knowledge. In contrast, social studies is interested in the more global goal of citizenship education and in a particular society. As James Shaver and Fred Newman[5] pointed out years ago, the study of social science, taken alone, is not a sufficient basis for citizenship education and in some respects it is an inappropriate basis. The usefulness of social science in citizenship education depends on understanding clearly what social science is and what it is not and depends further on learning the strategies for making applications from social science to the resolution of broad social problems and the development of social policy. This field of applied social science is, as Paul Starr[6] has pointed out in an article entitled, "The Edge of Social Science," the particular forte of the social studies.

Ideally, social science is objective. It prides itself in describing things as they are and not as they ought or should be. It may describe values but, as social science, it does not engage in valuing. It is neutral with respect to particular societies or cultures. It is highly specialized, one discipline and one scholar pursuing in depth only a very small segment of all that is known about society. It does not provide answers to social problems, first, because it is too specialized to do so with any credibility, secondly, because it fears the loss of its objectivity which is the currency of its trade, and thirdly because, when confronted with broad policy questions, social scientists, even in a single discipline, are seldom in agreement.

In short, social science does not give us ready answers to broad questions of sound policy. These questions must be dealt with by citizens and their political leaders, for social scientists are little better prepared than any one else for dealing with them.[7]

The methods which social scientists employ in their pursuit of knowledge are seldom replicated in classrooms. If we really believe that social studies is merely social science simplified or not, we would logically be required to abandon textbooks, lectures, and recitations in our classroom and set children to work at genuine social research or at least at replicating the methods of social research.

In contrast to social science, social studies may be conceived as a more comprehensive intellectual endeavor, as more a matter of utilizing knowledge from many sources in resolving social problems than of discovering new knowledge, as more a matter of reorganizing knowledge into new configuration dictated by the needs of public policy formation than of merely codifying knowledge.

Social science if properly understood and appropriately utilized, may contribute significantly to the social studies enterprise. If improperly used, the social sciences may actually hinder and get in the way. As Myrdal[8] pointed out years ago, history read without critical insight has the overall effect of stamping in the status quo. It leaves the impression that everything is as it is because it couldn't have been any other way. Hence, it is futile to try to change anything for the better. This, of course, is a safe haven for the privileged who frequently are the ones most insistent that history be taught via the straight memorization of facts. In like vein, one is reminded that

economic theories of just a few years ago, now clearly inadequate, give way with great resistence to new, more adequate theories.

Before we are on top of the problem of definition in the social studies, there must be developed a scholarship of the citizen which is parallel to, but also independent of and different from the scholarship of a discipline. And we must contrive to teach the intellectual strategies of this scholarship to young citizens. This scholarship of the citizen will necessarily embody the utilization of dependable information from the social sciences and from history but it will not end there and its nature will be determined by the broad needs of the citizen rather than the secular needs of the scholar in a discipline. It is imperative that we set ourselves to the task of perfecting this new brand of scholarship.

Failure to Make Necessary Distinctions Between the Role of Scholarship and That of Teaching. A closely related problem arises out of our failure to clearly distinguish between the scholarly pursuit of a discipline or subject and the act of teaching that discipline or subject. The two are usually treated casually as one and the same thing. It is assumed that the professor when he puts on his teaching frock is acting in the same mode as when he puts on his research eye-shades. Actually he may take a very different posture to his subject matter in the two cases.

Research is necessarily carried on in the hypothetical mood. The research scholar following what might be called his educated hunches, is continually searching for new and more dependable knowledge. The stock of knowledge in a field at any time is held to some degree circumspect. New findings are always held as being tentative awaiting

the onslaught of further scholarships. Scholars seldom arrive at final answers. More importance is attached to being able to ask more and more probing questions. The greatness of a scholar is not so much in the knowledge he may possess, although this may be considerable, but in the scope of the questions he is able to ask.

In marked contrast to scholarship, teaching is usually conducted in the expository mood. It is freighted with answers which the student is expected to digest and hold in memory. Teachers may more often be found expounding than raising really important questions, for these questions have no immediate and ready answer. Textbooks, too, are largely expository even when doctored up with so-called thought questions.

Because teaching is most often expository, it is open to great abuse of the learner for the very questions about which there is doubt in the eyes of the scholar may easily be treated as certainties in the hands of the teacher or in the textbook. Just as the scholar who may be intellectually humble and full of questioning within his research cubicle becomes an authority upon whose every word students hang once he mounts the podium, so the teacher in the schools, with much less reason because his knowledge is all second hand, easily becomes the undisputed authority in his classroom. A few teachers, understanding the fragileness of all knowledge and recognizing the power over the thinking of students that accrues to the act of teaching, may enter a disclaimer in their teaching so that students may be fore-warned of the intellectual pitfalls of a too rigid adherence to the so-called facts as these may be espoused by teacher and textbook. Thus teaching may be brought somewhat closer to the posture of scholarship. Some teaching methods, far more than others, encourage the development of

critical capacity over regimented thinking and some fly in the very face of such an outcome. Intellectual maturity essential to citizenship in a democracy may be quite as much a function of teaching methods as of content. If the social studies is to be adequately defined, the definition must importantly include a precise description of the kind of teaching which is consistent with the goals set forth for the social studies.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Robert D. Barr, James L. Barth, and S. Samuel Shermis, Defining the Social Studies, Bulletin 51, National Council for the Social Studies. Washington, D. C., 1977.

[2]Lawrence E. Metcalf, "Research on Teaching the Social Studies," N. L. Gage, et., Handbook of Research on Teaching. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963a., p. 930.

[3]Charles Clinton Peters, Objectives and Procedures in Civic Education, New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1930.

[4]Henry Steele Commanger, "Public Responsibility and the Educational Enterprise," National Elementary Principal, May/June 1975, pp. 6-15.

[5]James P. Shaver, "Social Studies: The Need for Redefinition," Social Education, November 1967, pp. 588-596; Fred M. Newman, "Questioning the Place of Social Science Disciplines in Education," Ibid., pp. 593-596.

[6]Paul Starr, "The Edge of Social Science," Harvard Education Review, November 1974, pp. 393-415.

[7]A recent article which sets out the limitations of the social sciences in resolving social problems is that of Joseph J. Schwab, "The Social Sciences," The Center Magazine, January/February 1980, pp. 36-41.

[8]Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma, Volume II, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, pp. 1035-1057.